

Contemporary Projects 11

HARD TARGETS

Masculinity and Sport



Los Angeles County Museum of Art
October 9, 2008-January 18, 2009



In 1976 the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe executed a portrait of the era's dominant bodybuilder and present-day governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In stark contrast to the familiar images of Schwarzenegger captured in the midst of competition—his body tanned, glistening, and tense; his face stoic and implacable—Mapplethorpe conjures a soft, sensual subject. Schwarzenegger, who was catapulted to fame when he won his first Mr. Olympia competition in 1970 at age twenty-three, appears anomalous in a studio setting. Unlike previous photographs, here he tentatively displays his hyperdeveloped triceps, calves, and abdomen. Flanked at the left by a sweeping paisley curtain that reiterates the mannerist curve of his pose, Schwarzenegger gazes rather vacantly at the camera.

The same year that Mapplethorpe shot this photograph, he also created one of his most famous and declarative homoerotic portraits, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)*, which shows the subject in profile, displaying his penis on a slick granite counter. Though indisputably unconventional for the 1970s, the rhetoric of Mapplethorpe's portrait of Schwarzenegger is equally straightforward. The artist has transformed a heterosexual male athlete into an object of his desire, and in so doing, he reminds viewers that the identity of an image can be distinct from the identity of the subject it captures, lending credence and a critical twist to the popular adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As art historian Richard Meyer has noted, "Mapplethorpe proposed homosexuality as a space of powerful difference and luxuriant pleasure, a space in which the relationship between bodies, objects, and surfaces . . . might be dramatically reimaged."¹ With this image, Mapplethorpe, if only for an instant, claimed and remade his subject. Although Schwarzenegger was and still is understood publically as a heterosexual man, our perception of the subject's social identity shifts dramatically under Mapplethorpe's gaze.

Similarly, though often more subtly, the six artists included in *Contemporary Projects 11: Hard Targets—Masculinity and Sport* seek to revise and complicate the time-honored archetype of the male athlete as an aggressive, overtly heterosexual, hypercompetitive, and emotionally remote subject. Instead, they offer alternative views of masculinity and sport, and of the entire theatre of athletic play, including the rituals and accoutrements that surround this



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Arnold Schwarzenegger*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, edition 5/10, 20 x 16 in. (50 x 40 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, gift, Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. © The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation / Art + Commerce.

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in. (50 x 40 cm). Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. © The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation / Art + Commerce.



Matthew Barney, still from *Drawing Restraint 4*, 1988. Video, black-and-white, silent. Video: Laurel Katz. Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles, CA. © Matthew Barney.

Matthew Barney, still from *MILE HIGH Threshold: FLIGHT with the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR*, 1991. Video, color, silent. Video: Peter Strietmann. Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles, CA. © Matthew Barney.

Matthew Barney, *Unit Bolus—Wad in, CONDITION, Wad out. (disciplinary funnel)*, 1991. Cast-petroleum jelly dumbbell, stainless steel, and electronic freezing device, 28 x 18 x 10 in. (71.1 x 45.7 x 25.4 cm). Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles, CA. © Matthew Barney.



intimate, male-dominated world. Mark Bradford, Harun Farocki, Brian Jungen, Shaun El C. Leonardo, Collier Schorr, and Joe Sola examine the way masculinity is characterized and performed in a sporting context, and each suggests that complex desires and identifications accompany the way we view athletes and consume sporting events.

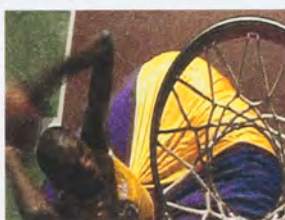
This new interest among practicing artists in the imagery of and materials associated with men's sports can be traced to the increasingly polymorphous depictions of star athletes in the media. More and more often, popular magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* publish portraits that lavish as much attention on the bodies and apparel of male athletes as has traditionally been accorded female models and celebrities endorsing cosmetics, clothing, and perfumes.

Matthew Barney was one of the first artists to integrate the imagery, materials, rhetoric, and ideology of sport into his practice, and in the process he recast, often quite jarringly, conservative stereotypes of male athletes. Beginning in the late 1980s, while still a student at Yale University, Barney borrowed liberally from his own experience as an athlete, from feminist and queer theory and art, and from artistic forebears like Joseph Beuys to produce work that denaturalized, sexualized, objectified, and variously distorted the archetypal American athlete—even going so far as to attack a blocking sled used in football drills while wearing a flowery dress for a video entitled *Drawing Restraint 4* (1988).

Critical acclaim for Barney coincided with a flurry of significant exhibitions and publications in the mid-1990s that ushered the topic of masculinity to the foreground. Just as feminist artists and theorists working during the 1960s and 1970s had argued convincingly for gender and sexuality as psychically mutable, socially conditioned, even performative states, so scholars working in the field of masculinity since the 1990s have drawn similar conclusions about men and their expressions of gender and sexuality. Due in large part to the foundational work of feminist and queer theorists, there is now a voluminous and sophisticated literature on masculinity and sport, most of it produced by social scientists, cultural theorists, and historians. There is also, of course, an equally voluminous literature on gender and sexuality in art, ranging from revisionist interpretations of Renaissance female nudes to dense theoretical tracts that reflect the full spectrum of gender and sexual expression in contemporary society. Almost no literature exists, however, on the interrelated subjects of masculinity, sport, and sexuality as subjects *within* art and art history. That masculinity as formed and displayed in and around sport has proved elusive to art historians and curators is due in large part to the fact that, until recently, there was not a sufficient critical mass of artwork to spur such discourse. In an effort to bring that discussion to the fore, this exhibition surveys some of the most provocative works produced over the last ten years that take masculinity and sport as their central theme.



Joe Sola, stills from *In the Woods*, 2008.
Digital-video projection, color, sound, 6:30
min. Courtesy of the artist. © Joe Sola.



Mark Bradford, stills from *Practice*, 2003.
Digital-video projection, color, sound, 3
min. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema
Jenkins & Co., New York. © Mark Bradford.

Homosociality

The works in *Hard Targets* fall into four broad and in many cases interconnected conceptual categories, the first of which is homosociality. The term *homosocial* was popularized by the literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who used the word to describe "the structure of men's relations with other men." She specifically examined rituals of male bonding and expressions of affection and desire within male-dominated social networks. Such actions, she observes, are often accompanied by shared expressions of intense homophobia intended to legitimize otherwise transgressive expressions of affection.²

An abiding interest in the way the shared rituals of male sports are employed to include the strong and virile—and exclude the weak and ineffective—is at the core of artist Shaun El C. Leonardo's performance-based work. On October 9, 2008, Leonardo staged an unscripted performance at LACMA entitled *Bull in the Ring*, the dynamics of which the artist describes this way:

"Bull in the Ring" is the term used to describe a specific training routine banned from American football on the high school and collegiate levels. In its original form, the team would form a revolving circle, and one player would be chosen to enter the center of the ring (the matador). One by one, players would be selected by their coach at random (the bull) to charge the player at the center, possibly catching him off guard to deliver a blow—the object being to have the center player develop alertness by "keeping [his] head on a swivel" and defending himself from all oncoming offenders.³

For his performance, Leonardo himself played the role of matador. The artist's participation in the drill, and his accompanying sculpture of the same title, gave brutal metaphoric form to the sacraments of inclusion and exclusion that structure the fraternal dynamics of sports teams from the inside but remain largely hidden from public view, even as sporting events often take place before thousands of people.

Video artist Joe Sola similarly explores the psychic struggle to realize strength and repress weakness, but through a fantastical metaphor. *In the Woods* (2008) follows the path of a hunter who emerges in camouflage from dense vegetation and happens upon a tree that contains a pink portal into a hidden world. The hunter reaches into this portal, and, after fumbling for some time, flips a light switch that activates an allegorical sequence featuring a waiflike young man and a heavily greased bodybuilder. Playing on the popular colloquialism "to flip the switch," often used to describe the ability of athletes to perform with aggressive, single-minded intensity, *In the Woods* speculates on the degree of sublimation required to achieve this state.



Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding* #12, 2002. Nike Air Jordans athletic footwear, 23 x 11 x 12 in. (58.4 x 27.9 x 30.5 cm). Collection of William and Ruth True. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery. © Brian Jungen.

Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding* #16, 2005. Nike Air Jordans athletic footwear, 19 ¼ x 14 ½ x 13 in. (50.2 x 35.9 x 33 cm). Collection of Joel Wachs. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery. © Brian Jungen.

The Regalia

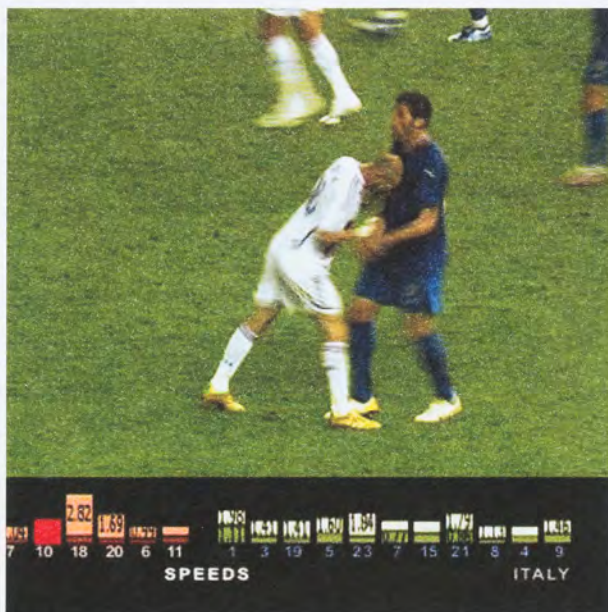
Inseparable from sport is the regalia that attends and gives aesthetic form to its performance and pop cultural influence. Canadian artist Brian Jungen and Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford share an interest in the ways that athletes are transformed into brands and how social identities are encoded in those marketing strategies. Both artists, however, find provocative ways to undo and recode those brands, thus demonstrating that even branded identities can be subject to revision.

From 1998 to 2005, Brian Jungen produced a series of sculptures collectively entitled *Prototypes for New Understanding* that are composed of Nike Air Jordan sneakers disassembled and reassembled to resemble the artworks produced by the peoples of the Northwest Coast First Nations, his ancestors. Most obviously, these uncanny, sometimes menacing apotropaic masks “articulate,” according to Jungen, “a paradoxical relationship between a consumerist artifact and an ‘authentic’ native artifact” to critique implicitly the way consumerism has overthrown native traditions in late capitalism.⁴ Less obviously, and perhaps more optimistically, they also attest to the possibility that social identities established in part through images and branding can still be remade. Accordingly, Nike Air Jordans—a product associated generally with athletic virtuosity and specifically with the imposing figure of basketball legend Michael Jordan—are, in the context of Jungen’s *Prototypes*, stripped of those associations and reimagined as tributes to an unspecified deity, unmoored from the ubiquitous commercial image of Jordan.

Mark Bradford explores more explicitly the close association of masculinity with specific signifiers. His video *Practice* (2003) upends and unravels a variety of cultural stereotypes. It shows Bradford—an unusually tall, lithe, black male—playing basketball while wearing an awkward, unwieldy gown in the unmistakable team colors of the Los Angeles Lakers. Bradford possesses many of the attributes, both racial and physical, that are conventionally associated with prowess on the court. His decision to play basketball not only in a dress but in one that seems designed to limit agility and success, however, bespeaks the notion that an individual’s identity can occupy a nebulous no-man’s-land both within and beyond societal prejudices.

Performance

The pioneering gender theorist Judith Butler has proposed that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing that might be said to preexist the deed.” She argues that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender.”⁵ This provocative suggestion provides insight into the practices of German artist Harun Farocki and Los Angeles-based artist Joe Sola, whose wildly divergent video works each examine the way we frame and consume sport.



Harun Farocki, stills from *Deep Play*, 2007. Twelve-channel digital-video projection, color, sound, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Photos: Jason Mandella; courtesy of Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. © Harun Farocki.

Farocki's *Deep Play* (2007) is a twelve-channel, multi-perspective, video-based deconstruction of the 2006 World Cup final between France and Italy. Composed of surveillance-camera footage, computer schematics, television coverage, two- and three-dimensional animation, and mathematical analyses of game data, Farocki creates a startling visual record of the level of scrutiny soccer players endure from the media. An artist renowned for works such as *Images of the World and Inscription of War* (1988) that analyze the representation of war in the media, Farocki here reveals how contemporary televisual conventions mediate and control our experience of sport.

Sola's *Saint Henry Composition* (2001), by contrast, is less methodically analytical and more whimsical and light-hearted in its critique of masculine expression in sports, focusing instead on denaturalizing American football through humor and anomaly. More pointedly than any other work in this exhibition, *Saint Henry Composition* draws out the distinctions between sport and art. In his video, Sola enacts these divisions by inserting himself, plain clothed and ill prepared, into a high school football practice, whereupon the exposed body of the artist is bludgeoned and battered by those properly equipped for the task at hand—a narrative that reiterates with blunt force and satire the incompatibility of these two worlds.

Hard Targets

Of any other works in the exhibition, Collier Schorr's visceral portraits of high school wrestlers and their training environment provide the closest and most unvarnished encounter with the bodies of male athletes. Unlike the other five exhibition artists discussed, who use strategies such as performance and appropriation to confront and reframe the question of masculinity in sport, Schorr suggests that the same depth and complexity revealed in Bradford's *Practice* is evident in the raw subjects alone if observed closely and captured at the right moment. "The wrestlers were all shot in a big practice room," she recalls:

Perhaps fifty kids were present at any given time. I would bob and weave between some twenty-two pairs of wrestlers, always within inches of being knocked over. Moving around in that 100-degree room, I could almost feel like I was mirroring their activity, so the very act of photographing felt like dancing or fighting. With that body of work I wanted to position the viewer within the situation rather than outside it... The performers in that project were wrestlers, but they were aware of the camera's ability to further activate the heightened sense of reality in the room and the abstract ways in which they experienced space and motion.⁶



Joe Sola, still from *Saint Henry Composition*, 2001. Digital-video projection, color, sound, 5:07 min. Courtesy of the artist and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio. © Joe Sola.



Collier Schorr, *152 lbs. (H.T.)*, 2003. Chromogenic color print, 37 x 47 in. (94 x 119.4 cm). Collection of Alan Hergott and Curt Shepard, Los Angeles. © Collier Schorr.

Collier Schorr, *Bruised by marble beds*, 2002. Chromogenic color print, 34 1/4 x 45 in. (87 x 114.3 cm). Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York. © Collier Schorr.



Schorr's account and her insistent use of the term "performers" rather than "wrestlers" or "athletes" suggest that, under scrutiny, the young men she photographed presented themselves differently and self-consciously, displaying two or even multiple selves: the one projected in training; the one proposed for the instant they were photographed; and, perhaps, another identity largely hidden from view. In some of her most powerful work, such as *Bruised by marble beds* (2002), Schorr offers partial views of these three fragmentary selves in one frame. As the artist has noted:

I want to show the whole temperature [of masculinity] because—and I can only approach it as a woman . . . from the outside—masculinity has been depicted in very black-and-white terms. There never seems to be a wide range of emotional definitions of men. And I think in wrestling you really see so many different emotions, so many different reactions and interactions.⁷

The critical currency of her imagery results from the uncertainty it engenders in the mind of the viewer, which, in turn, mimics the similar state of indecision depicted in the photograph.

Finally, Schorr's group portrait *Hooded Figures (B.C.)* (2003), on the cover, serves as an apt metaphor for the difficulties involved in interpreting her enigmatic subjects and, indeed, for the myriad difficulties that attend the broader problem of looking carefully and critically at the subject of masculinity and sport. Huddled together arm in arm, heads bowed and hooded, faces solemn, introspective, and directed inward toward each other, the image captures all that is stolid yet sensual about masculinity and sport. Both qualities are evident at once in *Hooded Figures (B.C.)*, alluding to a deep well of meaning buried in the image but precluding the possibility of a single comprehensive view. This photograph, like each of the works in the exhibition, does not penetrate the heart of its subject; rather, it offers but one tantalizing perspective on a persistently hard target.

—Christopher Bedford

1 Richard Meyer, "Mapplethorpe's Living Room: Photography and the Furnishing of Desire," *Art History* 24, no. 2 (April 2001): 295.

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 2.


3 Shaun El C. Leonardo, email message to author, December 20, 2007.

4 Matthew Higgs, "Brian Jungen in Conversation with Matthew Higgs," in *Brian Jungen* (Vienna: Secession, 2003), 25.

5 Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

6 Collier Schorr, email message to author, May 21, 2008.

7 Schorr, quoted in "Wrestlers Love America," *Art 21*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/schorr/clip2.html>.



Related Events

Conversations with Artists

Collier Schorr

Friday, October 10, 2008, 7 p.m.

Brown Auditorium | Free, tickets required—available one hour before the event begins

New York-based artist Collier Schorr, whose work is featured in *Hard Targets*, will speak with exhibition curator Christopher Bedford about what she calls “performances within performances: dualities in movement and gesture,” a subject that alludes to the range of masculine emotions and expressions Schorr captures in her photographs of high school wrestlers.

Discussion

Talking Hard Targets: Masculinity in Sport and Contemporary Art

Thursday, October 16, 2008, 7 p.m.

Bing Theater | Free, no reservations

Artists Jeff Sheng and Kori Newkirk, art historian Jennifer Doyle, and exhibition curator Christopher Bedford will address how contemporary art engages with and disrupts conventional codes of masculinity, particularly in relation to imagery of athletes and sports. Among the questions that may be explored by the roundtable: How does contemporary art address our collective attraction to spectacle, even the spectacle of the body? How does contemporary art complicate our notions of sport and masculinity? Richard Meyer, associate professor of art history and director of The Contemporary Project at the University of Southern California, will moderate the discussion.

Cosponsored by The Contemporary Project (TCP) at the University of Southern California. TCP at USC fosters public dialogue and collaboration between the academic community and the contemporary art world. The project expands the boundaries of traditional university teaching and scholarly exchange by drawing upon the creative, curatorial, and critical energies of contemporary art.



the contemporary project

for the study of contemporary art, culture, and criticism at usc

Screening

Two Videos by Matthew Barney

Thursday, November 20, 2008, 7:30 p.m.

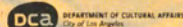
Bing Theater | Free, no reservations

Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 4* (1994) and *Drawing Restraint 10* (2005) demonstrate the artists's career-long interest in incorporating the materials and imagery of sports into his work, interests that resonate with the artists featured in *Hard Targets*. (*Cremaster 4*: video, color, silent, 59:20 min.; *Drawing Restraint 10*: 35mm, color, sound, 42 min.)

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and made possible by Nike Sportswear and the Contemporary Projects Endowment Fund. Contributors to the fund include Mr. and Mrs. Eric Lidow, Ronnie and Vidal Sassoon, Steve Martin, The Broad Art Foundation, Bob Crewe, Tony and Gail Ganz, Ansley I. Graham Trust, Peter Norton Family Foundation, Barry and Julie Smooke, and Sandra and Jacob Y. Turner.



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Joe Sola, still from *In the Woods*, 2008.
Digital-video projection, color, sound;
6:30 min. Courtesy of the artist.
© Joe Sola.

Cover

Collier Schorr, *Hooded Figures (B.C.)*, 2003. Chromogenic color print, 39 1/2 x 52 in. (100.3 x 132.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York.
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